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## **A new perspective on the soft skills hospitality management students need to be successful in the hospitality industry: Meeting the gold standard and the Soft Skills Index**

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## Introduction

There is a disparity between the soft skills which are seen as necessary in the hospitality service industry and the perception that hospitality students have of the skill set they possess, as well as their readiness for the hospitality industry. While students can acquire some soft skills via internships or by learning on the job, hotel managers seek employees with a level of readiness that is often lacking. According to the responses of hotel managers currently working in major New York City hotels, there is a gap between the actual soft skills that students have and those that they need. The responses of hospitality service students show a lack of awareness as to the specific soft skills which are necessary for them to acquire. This article seeks to show how to bridge that gap via proposed ideas by the author to improve students' soft skills and how to determine which candidates are suitable. Specifically, one hospitality manager mentioned that it was important for potential candidates to possess the "It Factor," described as a package of charm, grace, and a personalized service attitude, which identifies the candidate as an optimum service ambassador.

According to top researchers in the field of hospitality, the following qualities were determined to be invaluable for future service professionals. Alonso and O'Neil, in their article, "What Defines the "Ideal" Hospitality Employee," they stated a need for employees with attitudinal characteristics of good work ethic, punctuality, responsibility, and accountability. Soft skills include interpersonal traits, which, according to Wolfe, Phillips, and Asperin (2014), are the models for soft skills for those who serve in the hospitality industry.

Soft skills, even more than technical skills, are essential in the hospitality industry, as stated in *Soft Skills that Make or Break Your Success*, by Dr. Assegid Habtewold, in which he highlighted the 12 soft skills he claimed are integral to attaining the lion's share of success for service providers. He stressed that those who neglect to develop their soft skills will ultimately lose their appeal to the service industry, and negatively affect service organizations. Complaints, and the affects, which have been linked to a lack of soft skills in service providers are: high turnover, conflict, lack of synergy, and low levels of productivity.

In an example of the importance of soft skills, Habtewold pointed to the phenomenal partnership between Steve Wozniak and Steve Jobs, founders of the Apple, Inc. company, and its heavy emphasis on providing excellent customer service. He claims that if it weren't for Job's excellent soft skills, Wozniak, with his technical skills alone, would not have been able to make Apple the success that it has become. While the above example relates to a product that provides a service rather than to a person who provides a service in the hospitality industry, the idea comes to the same: soft skills are key, and even more important, than technical skills, in terms of building client relations, the brand, the business, and customer loyalty.

According to Young (2018), soft skills are the primary predictor of success, not only in the hospitality industry, but also in the areas of academics, career, and in life. His experience of employing a Yale graduate with advanced technical skills, but poor soft skills, to assist him in his private practice as a therapist resulted in a loss of clients after about two sessions due to his employee's poor interactions with them, and poor soft skills

set. It showed him that a person who otherwise has essential technical skills might not have the most essential qualities, that is to say, soft skills, for professional success. He soon recognized that soft skills were the most powerful predictor of success in career and life. They have a significant impact on academic, career, and personal success (Pairin). He said for years that educators reported that 80% of their hospitality industry graduates were ready for work; however, in fact, employers reported that less than 20% of graduates were ready for work as they lacked these essential soft skills.

Some students have the impression that a college degree is sufficient for their success, and that it is the only qualification that they need to get through the door in order to have a successful career in the hospitality industry. They may believe that after having studied hospitality management for a number of years that they are equipped with the necessary tools for a job in the industry. However, they should consider the specific employability skills which employers require and favor. According to Belt, Drake, and Chapman (2010), those with the skills that are in demand stand out as entry-level employees with “employability” skills which are more welcome than those with specialist subject knowledge.

Tourism hot spots like New York City seek candidates who are educated, informed, motivated, passionate, and are prepared with industry level skills and the character traits and qualities to serve guests who demand a high level of service. Hospitality management institutions should aim to improve students’ knowledge and understanding of employability skills (Ogbeide, 2009). Casner-Lotto and Barrington (2006), identified the following skills as the main practical skills employers seek. They are communication, teamwork, professionalism, problem solving and managing resources. Consequently, employers expect graduates to have a well-developed set of hospitality skills, so that they are able to make an immediate impression and to provide a valuable contribution to the workplace when they are hired.

## **Literature Review**

Many students want to be in the hospitality industry but do not understand the weight soft skills carry in determining whether or not they will obtain hospitality jobs. They often focus more on getting a college degree, thinking that it alone will get them the “through the door” of an interview and into a good hospitality position. It appears that some hospitality curriculums in colleges do not focus on students developing these skills as much as they do on students developing technical skills in hospitality. It appears that while students are learning soft skills in hospitality programs in college, they are not using them effectively during the interview process. Perhaps they have them, but they do not utilize them effectively as interviewers seem to find them lacking in soft skills.

## **Graduates, With or Without the Soft Skills**

How far can graduates get without these skills and what can they achieve? The answer is not very far, because hospitality businesses are looking for the “ideal” hospitality employee, according to Alonso and O’Neill (2011). In their article, “What Defines the ‘Ideal’ Hospitality Employee,” they shared the results from research conducted in different hospitality environments. The information includes important soft-skills attributes that employers seek from prospective employees. They stated that 99% of

employers surveyed believed that “soft-skills” including social and interpersonal skills were very important, as well as self-presentation skills.

According to the former general manager of the Jamaica Grand Resort, in Ocho Rios, Jamaica, West Indies, the ideal customer service representative is a person who is like a “100 Watt bulb,” with an energy that is incredibly welcoming to the guest, making the guest feel completely at ease, taken care of, and special. This soft skill is one of the hallmarks of the ideal hospitality employee. Additional qualities are having a glow about themselves, a passionate vibrancy, and exuberance about interpersonal interactions with the guest, so that the guests feel like the center of attention and that all of their needs will be met and all of their requests will be fulfilled.

The gold standard for hospitality may be the Ritz-Carlton Hotel when it comes to customer service and client interactions. The book *The New Gold Standard* written about the Ritz-Carlton Hotels’ hospitality guidelines, “established what have become the gold standard for luxury and epitome of service excellence” (Michelli, 2008). According to President Simon Cooper,

You can’t put the veneer of quality on a business that lacks a sound foundation. The Gold Standard, and the disciplined business practices that emerge from them, create the platform for the achievements of our company in areas as wide ranging as our attractiveness to job seekers, our recognition for customer engagement, and our accomplishments in quality excellence throughout the world.

### **The statement of the problem**

Students are graduating from colleges and are not prepared to meet or to undertake the challenges of the industry. Employers feel that students lack certain competencies when they enter the world of work (Spowart, 2011). According to Michael McKay of Typsy.com (2017), the Department of Tourism, Leisure, Hotel and Sport Management in 2015 claimed:

Hospitality workplace demands skills such as problem solving, critical thinking, and emotional intelligence, which are important to the performance of businesses, and subsequently success for employees. However, managers in the industry find that students’ perceptions of the skills that they need to have are at odds with the actual soft skill set that they need to succeed.

My research examined the skills and qualities that hospitality management students claimed to have so they would succeed in the hospitality industry. It looked at their awareness levels of those skills, and the competencies of the students, as they seek to gain employment. The study investigated the extent to which students believed they possessed the skills that were needed in the hospitality industry.

### **Methodology**

The details and methods behind the research and study include information about the steps that were taken to answer the research questions and test the hypotheses. The section includes the research questions, research design, data collection plan, and data analysis plan. The purpose of this study is to contribute to the existing knowledge and

research base about the efficacy of professional development for strategies in order for educators to better support students seeking to work in the hospitality industry. College curriculums for the hospitality industry were assessed via a survey that was administered to students through an online questionnaire. This participatory action research method described the type of soft skills development that were offered to students in hospitality curriculums at the college level, the perception of effectiveness and value of the professional development as identified by students as to whether or not they were able to apply soft skills in the industry as a result of participating in courses on soft skill development.

### **Research questions**

This exploratory participatory action research investigated the following research questions:

For the students:

- (1) How many students perceived themselves to possess soft skills?
- (2) What did students perceive to be the most important skills for a new hire?
- (3) What did students believe were the expectations of a new hire?

For the general managers:

- (4) What were the basic skills requirements of a job applicant?
- (5) What skills did the general managers believe a top-quality candidate must possess?
- (6) What soft skills did the general managers think were most important?

### **Skills hospitality management say are required for the hospitality industry**

One of the things that stand out in a survey of hospitality managers is that employers who were interviewed said that getting the right candidate was not always a straightforward process as they were not aware of the Gold Standard for hospitality and how to meet that standard. Employers stress that spotting the right employee is very difficult, because everyone is always on their best behaviour during the interview process, but they are not necessarily following the specific guidelines of having a “wow” and able to show that they can create a “Wow experience” as a future employee, which are integral to providing superior service.

Some employers opt for a “wait and see” approach to determine whether the candidates will match the business’ needs and be able to recreate that “Wow experience.” As a result, they work with them for a couple of weeks to determine if they show any negative attributes. The companies hire those candidates they prefer as they try and fix the problems, and for those whom they cannot help, they let them go (Alonso & O’Neill, 2011). If it were easier to assess students’ readiness in terms of employability, to measure that, and to address any deficiencies, then students would be a better fit for the hospitality industry and this “wait and see” approach would not be necessary.

One can see that hiring the right employees is very important for the hospitality industry, but it is not easy task to identify the right candidates with the right skills, even when they

demonstrate the right attitude during the interview and the probationary period. Therefore, it is important that candidates make sure that they themselves identify, acquire, and/or learn the soft-skills prior to presenting themselves as candidates for employment - specifically, what the Gold Standard for hospitality is as presented by the Ritz-Carlton. Employers want people who are able to adapt, absorb, or assimilate new ways of doing things, concepts, and systems. They want people who can apply the necessary skills to be successful in the work environment (Alonso & O'Neill, 2011).

Employers want employees who can deal with customers, while displaying “service excellence” characteristics. They want employees who are sincere with customers, so they will not have to worry about losing customers, because the employee was indifferent to their needs. Employers want employees who embody attributes which appeal to the senses of the customers, and are willing and able to talk to, and to entertain customers, and to make them feel at home.

Since hospitality is a service-driven industry, employees need to understand that the customer is always right and they are there to serve them, regardless of the circumstances. Employers need people who dependable, possess a good work ethic, and will take care of the customers, because customers are the most important part of business. It may be that the inexperienced hospitality worker, who is untutored in the ways of the Gold Standard, may not see interactions with a difficult customer as an opportunity to uphold that standard and to gage a situation, and to ameliorate it, so that the customer becomes extremely satisfied and becomes a loyal guest.

What may help in this regard is for job candidates to have some form of an “eye-opening” experience or a reality check (Alonso & O'Neill, 2011). This may refer to internships or on-the-job training, so that candidates can see where their strengths and weaknesses lie and address them prior to the application process. Some people may not be suited to the hospitality industry, especially the younger generation, who may not be as focused on soft skills, but may take their degree for granted as an entryway into the industry.

Another possibility would be for candidates for the hospitality industry to take a customer service course that is geared towards developing ideal soft skills in keeping with the Gold Standard. As such, I have developed an ideal customer service sample course to improve hospitality workers’ soft skills designed for prospective hospitality industry ambassadors, so that they may acquire the ultimate in soft skills and be prepared for both the interview process and the working environment. An outline for the course appears in Appendix A.

The employee turnover rate in the hospitality industry is very high. According to Wells (2018), the Bureau of Labor Statistics estimates an annualized employee turnover rate of 73.8% in the hotel and motel industry. Needless to say, some researchers have suggested that a “realistic recruitment” should provide complete and unbiased information to job candidates, telling them exactly what they are looking for in their qualities/skills. This would help to attract only those who match the job profile, which would help to reduce job turnover rate – hopefully (Alonso & O'Neill, 2011).

Alonso and O'Neill (2011) considered that if a job candidate’s personality is suited for the hospitality profession, then it is a sign of quality in prospective staff. And, sometimes finding the right people for the job poses challenges for the functioning working environment, especially when it depends upon customer service. There is the feeling that

students do not pay attention to the basic principles of service during their university experience, or they may not have been enforced in the classroom. As a result, the acceptance of the need of the service skills become attitudinal and is carried over into the workplace. This leads to poor service, which leads to poor customer reviews, negative word of mouth, and results in loss of business for organizations.

Hospitality students do have a responsibility to make sure that they educate themselves and that they obtain the skills they need for their career and the hospitality industry. They cannot afford to overlook this critical component of the hospitality industry, which is soft skills. If students do not ensure that they possess soft skills, then it will put hospitality managers at a disadvantage as they search for those with the right skills. And, managers do have much to lose in not paying attention to recruitment and retention processes when looking at graduates. They themselves have to possess the right skills in order to identify the people of quality when they walk through their door (Alonso & O'Neill, 2011).

Identifying graduates with the right skills for employment is always critical for the work environment. And, as much as these skills are critical, it is not always an easy task to identify those with the required skills – it is a challenging task. Regardless of these challenges, soft skills are very important to the success of any business. In a study completed by Sisson and Adams (2013), it was determined that of the essential competencies needed for management, 86 % were soft competencies, which stressing the need programs to teach hospitality students' soft competences instead of hard competencies.

### **Skills required for the hospitality industry**

It was discovered in the previous research study that soft skills such as communication were crucial in career advancement for some. For hotel mid-management movement, directing and delegating skills were very important. What is also important is the skill of listening, which plays a major role in advanced positions, such as those of the general managers. While these are not the only skills for the industry, others, such as interpersonal, leadership, and conceptual-creative competencies are seen as very important for hotel manager trainees. However, technical skills, which could be thought of very important by some, came in as the least important (Sisson & Adams, 2013).

Nothing can make up for the lack of soft skills which are so important in the management of employees. Managing employees require special human qualities and skills, such as socialization and interpersonal competencies, which are important in enhancing the socialization and development of employee personnel. Therefore, it can be assumed that the more trained and developed graduates are in the skillsets required for service jobs, the better they will be in terms of providing great service. Much effort is required by educational institutions to help to prepare students with necessary skills for the job market. Sisson and Adams (2013) shared in their study that soft skills, such as customer service and communication skills, should be included and assessed as part of the hospitality curriculum.

According to Wilson-Wünsch, Beausaert, Tempelaar, and Gijsselaers (2016), emotional intelligence is pivotal to an organization's success, especially when it comes to the recruitment, training, and development of personnel. Emotional intelligence looks at the ability of individuals to recognize and regulate their own emotions. It also consists of the

ability to influence others' emotions, self-motivation, and the ability to form effective long-term relationships with others (Greenberg & Baron, 2003).

In addition, Goleman (2005) stated that emotional intelligence can be considered a cluster of abilities, which includes the ability to coordinate efforts with other people, while possessing the ability to negotiate solutions to interpersonal problems. Also, those possessing emotional intelligence have the uncanny ability to be in control of conversations with others while holding their interest. It is clear that emotional intelligence is an important component in developing highly competent managers, and as a result, it correlates to professional expertise (Goleman, 2005; Salovey & Mayer, 1990).

There are also other skills, such as teamwork skills, which are required for the job, since employers expect employees to be team players. While it might be true that there are some jobs which are suited best for an independent worker, and that one may perform the bulk of job duties on his or her own, one must remember that there are broader goals and one has to communicate accomplishments to other people. There are five teamwork skills, which employers are looking for: communication, conflict management, listening, reliability, and respectfulness (Doyle, 2019).

Being a good communicator is critical to being part of a team. It is as important as communicating clearly your ideas to others in your team or group. You must be able to effectively convey information via telephone, email, or in person. In the process, you will want to make sure that your tone is always professional, yet friendly. You are expected to demonstrate quality in both verbal and nonverbal communication (Doyle, 2019).

Another important teamwork skill for the workplace is conflict management. Conflict management means possessing the ability to negotiate with your team members, where you are able to settle disputes and make sure that everyone is happy with yours and the team's choice (Doyle, 2019). Conflict resolution may also be defined as the informal or formal process that two or more parties uses to find a peaceful solution to a dispute. Some emotional traps, many of them unconscious, can aggravate conflict and contribute to the need for conflict resolution (Shonk, 2019). An example is overconfidence. This is when we display certain brashness in our judgments, which is a tendency that leads to unrealistic expectations. It is said that disputants are likely to be overconfident about the odds of say triumphing a dispute. For instance, an error could lead a person to shun a renegotiated settlement that would save time and money.

Another important teamwork skill, which plays a pivotal role in communication, is listening (Doyle, 2019). She explained that one must be able to listen to the ideas and concerns of one's peers if one is to be considered an effective team member. Demonstrating the ability to ask relevant questions for clarification, showing concern, and using nonverbal cues, will help you to show your team members that you care about the issues, and that you understand them, and that you possess insight as to what may have transpired. The skill of listening is followed by the quality of reliability. Team members must be able to trust and depend on you. As a result, you must stick to your deadlines and complete the tasks you are assigned, which helps you to gain the confidence and trust of fellow workers (Doyle, 2019).

Being respectful goes a long way when it comes to the hospitality industry, and therefore, as one considers the importance of working relationships, one might say that people



would be more open to communicating if they conveyed respect to others. For this reason, one should consider kind and courteous acts, such as using a person's name when speaking, making eye contact, and active listening, which shows a person that he or she is appreciated (Doyle, 2019). Respectfulness really is the foundation of a great team and for employee satisfaction, which ultimately leads to customer satisfaction.

### **Population and sampling procedure for students**

A participatory action research study was conducted with a sample of students at a Community College located in Eastern New York. The college selected for this study was moderate to large in size and within suburban public-school district. The students were recruited from a group of senior students in the Hospitality Department. A survey was administered electronically by SurveyMonkey to the hospitality management senior student population in the hospitality department at the college. The survey was emailed electronically, and a follow up email was sent 30 business days after the initial email to ensure that students were reminded to participate if they chose. A questionnaire was created by the researcher in order to reach multiple participants over a month and collected the most data possible during this time span.

The subjects were recruited through an email to the hospitality department with participation on a voluntary basis. The participants were limited to discipline area of hospitality seniors. This was a delimitation of the study. The sample size was 66 students. There were no exclusions based on age, gender, economic status, or race. Both regular and special needs students were surveyed. There were no inducements or benefits offered to research subjects. The department Dean provided the general faculty list email addresses in order for the researcher to send out the survey electronically, therefore the Dean did not select the recipients of the survey. Since the faculty did not have access to who had or had not taken the survey, the participants were protected from coercion.

The researcher obtained voluntary, informed consent from the study participants. This consent was administered in the introduction of the research survey. The potential participants were sent an email informing them about the research. The email contained a link to the consent form, along with the link to the survey. The consent form contained information describing the survey, the purpose for research, the risks, the protections in place and how to proceed with the survey. The students were required to read the consent form and digitally sign it and click "I agree" to start the survey. There was only one survey for the participants, without any additional follow-ups or interviews. The email was sent to registered hospitality seniors who agreed to take the survey. In the college, the survey was sent out to 100 students; 66 students responded, which indicated a response rate of 66%.

### ***Student data collection***

The data collection focused on the students' knowledge of soft skills, the level of their soft skills, and their abilities of applying their soft skills. The survey was created by the researcher as an online questionnaire sent by email through SurveyMonkey. The survey included four skills importance questions, three quality-related questions, two questions to quantify skills rating, one personal preference question, and one performance expectation question. The skills importance questions focused on skills preparation and skill potentials for job placement. While the quality-related questions highlight the level

of skills accomplishment relative to the needs of the industry, the questions on quantifying skills rating sought to measure the level of skills accomplishment. The question on performance expectation helped the students to do a self-introspection on their ability to perform in a new job environment.

### ***Population and sampling procedure for general managers***

A participatory action research study was conducted with a sample of New York City Hotel General Managers. The hotels selected for this study were moderate to large size New York City hotels. The general managers were recruited from a pool of thirty who were contacted via emails soliciting their participation. Once confirmations of the general managers' participation were received, appointment dates and times were set up for each general manager. A quantitative survey Questionnaire was created by the researcher in order to reach multiple participants over a 6-month period and collected the most data possible during this time span.

The subjects were recruited through an email to the various hotels with participation on a voluntary basis. The participants were limited to discipline area of hotel service operations. This was a delimitation of the study. The sample size was 12 general managers. There were no exclusions based on age, gender, economic status, or race. Both regular and special needs managers were surveyed. There were not any inducements or benefits offered to the research subjects. Contact information was obtained via Linked, and or hotel websites, which allowed the researcher to send out invitations electronically, and therefore the researcher did not select which recipient would participate in the survey. Since the researcher did not determine who did or did not take part in the survey, the participants were protected from coercion.

The researcher obtained voluntary, informed consent from the study participants. This consent was administered in the introduction of the research survey. The potential participants were sent an email informing them about the research. The email included the consent form, along with information about the survey. The consent form contained information describing the survey, the purpose for research, the risks, the protections in place, and the process of the survey. The general managers were required to read the consent form and personally sign to "agree" to start the survey. There was only one survey for the participants, without any additional follow-ups or interviews. The email was sent to hotel general managers who agreed to take the survey. The survey was sent out to 30 general managers: 12 managers responded which indicated a response rate of 40%.

### ***General manger data collection***

The survey was created to link the theoretical research questions of the study to specific questions in the questionnaire. Questions 2 through 4 are related to conceptual research Question 1 and address the mindset of the student in their pursuit and professional development of the skills they need to acquire for success in the industry. The questions were created in order to generate items on the survey that directly related to the conceptual research question regarding the effectiveness of their professional development. Questions 1, 7, 8, 9 and 14, are related to conceptual research Question 2, and address the perceived value of the professional development of the students and their access to skills building hospitality programs. The questions were created in order to generate items on

the survey that directly related to the conceptual research question regarding the value of the professional development programs. Questions 5 and 6 are related to conceptual research Question 2 and addressed the skills gaps of the professional development programs (see Table 1). The questions were created in order to generate items on the survey that directly related to the conceptual research question regarding the practicality of the professional development programs. Question 10 was created to address student job readiness mentality for the real-world experience by looking at how prepared they are to step into their first job. Questions 11 and 12 addressed the professional mindset of the students and they challenged their professional acumen to influence job outcomes. Question 13 was developed to assess the success that hotels general managers have in identifying applicants who meet skills criteria for employment.

## **Data analysis**

For Question 1, I conducted frequencies and percentages for the number of students who perceive themselves to possess a variety of soft skills. For conceptual research Questions 2 through 6, I conducted a qualitative data analysis procedure called conventional and summative content analysis.

This study includes the description of the methodology, the participants of the study, the population, and the sampling methodology. The researcher established the content validity for the questionnaire. As a result of reading the scholarly literature on this topic, the researcher devised a set of questions that would elicit information from students and hotel general managers about the qualities that are necessary for people working in the service industry. It was aligned with the content in that area. The information was approved by an industry expert who has worked with, and is currently involved in, the content area. No hypotheses were advanced for this study because all of the conceptual research questions were exploratory in nature.

## **Results**

The collected data focused on how students perceived their skills: soft and professional skills. The data also focused on the actual skills they possessed in these categories. Differences were found between the students' perceptions of their skills, and the industry's needs in terms of those skills. Tables were used to assess these findings.

### **Question 1: How many students perceive themselves to possess soft skills and professional skills?**

In Table 2, the number of students who claimed to possess the ability to demonstrate positive customer care ( $n = 65$ , 98.5%) is significantly higher than the number of those claiming to possess the ability to solve a problem in Table 3.

The number of students who claimed to possess critical thinking skills is high ( $n = 61$ , 93.8%; see Table 3). There is a 2.9% difference greater than those who claimed to possess the ability to solve a problem.

Although professional skills are not considered soft skills, the researcher did ask respondents to say whether they possessed professional skills or not, and the researcher

found that a large majority possessed professional skills ( $n = 61$ , 93.8%) as shown in Table 4. The results are similar to what students feel about critical thinking.

As shown in Table 5, a large number of the students claimed to possess the ability to solve problems ( $n = 60$ , 90.9%). However, the number is slightly different from the number of students ( $n = 61$ , 93.8%) who claimed to possess the ability of critical thinking in Table 3.

#### **Question 2: What do students perceive to be the most important skills for a new hire?**

For the skills that students believed were most important for a new hire, the sample size from the study has emphasized the greatest needs in communication, people skills, empathy, and patience. Additional skills were mentioned; however, fewer than 10% saw those as being important; 36%, or 1 out of three people mentioned the theme of communication; 23%, or 1 out of 4 mentioned people skills; and 15.2%, or 1 out of 7 mentioned empathy and patience (see Table 7).

#### **Question 3: What do students believe are the expectations of a new hire?**

For the skills that students believed were the expectations for a new hire, the sample size from the study has emphasized the greatest needs in the theme of communication, the theme of customer service, and the theme of empathy and care. The additional theme of professionalism was mentioned; however, fewer than 10% considered it important; 39.4%, or 1 out of 2.5 people mentioned the theme of communication; 23%, or 1 out of 4 mentioned the theme of customer service, and 15.2%, or 1 out of 6.6 people mentioned the theme of empathy and care (see Table 8).

#### **Question 4: What are the basic skills requirements of a job applicant?**

General managers believed the basic skills requirement for a new hire from a sample size of the study has shown the greatest needs in the themes of people skills, passion and care, and professionalism. The additional theme of communication is mentioned; however, fewer than 10% considered it important. The top three themes' percentages and frequencies are as follows: 36.4%, or 1 out of 2.75 people mentioned the theme of passion and care, and 25%, or 1 out of 4 people mentioned the theme of professionalism (see Table 9).

#### **Question 5: What skills do general managers believe a top-quality candidate must possess?**

The sample size in the study is an expression of general managers who believe that the skills a top-quality candidate must possess, are strongly represented in the themes of passion and care, people skills, and professionalism. The additional themes of flexibility and service attitude are mentioned; however, fewer than 10% for each saw them as being important. The top three themes are expressed as follows: 27.5%, or 1 out of 3.6 people mentioned the theme of passion and care; 22.5%, or 1 out of 4.4 people mentioned the theme of people skills, and 20%, or 1 out of 5 people mentioned the theme of professionalism (see Table 10).

#### **Question 6: What soft skills do general managers think are most important?**

The sample size in the study is an expression of general managers who believe that the most important soft skill requirement for a new hire is greatly represented in the theme of people skills, followed by the theme of professionalism and the theme of personality. The additional theme of smile, and the theme of passion and care are mentioned; however, fewer than 10%, saw them as being important. The top three themes are expressed as follows: 48%, or 1 out of 2.1 people mentioned the theme of people skills; 20%, or 1 out of 5 people mentioned the theme of professionalism, and 12%, or 1 out of 8 people mentioned the theme of personality (see Table 11).

## **Summary**

A disparity exists between the soft skills students perceived they had and the soft skills that general managers said were needed in the industry. The desired top three soft skills which general managers said students needed were ranked accordingly, as follows: in Table 9, people skills was 36.4%; passion and care was 27.5%; and professionalism was 25%. In Table 10, passion and care was 27.5%; people skills was 22.5%; professionalism was 20%. In Table 11, people skills was 48%; professionalism was 20%; personality was 12%. The combined results of the general managers' assessments in these tables were: people skills was 70.9%; passion and care was 54.8%; and professionalism was 65%. The top three skills for the general managers were: people skills; professionalism; and passion and care. The additional theme of personality was mentioned, but fewer than 12% of the general managers saw it as important. This researcher has determined that the greatest disparity lies in the people skills that the students perceive they have and those that the managers say are needed. However, it was also determined that the students possessed a relatively high degree of professional skills, which matched what general managers said were needed in the industry.

## **Conclusions**

From the research that has been conducted here, it has been determined that even though students perceive themselves to be up to the standards of the industry as far as both soft and professional skills, that there was a gap between students' perceptions vs. the what general managers determined were essential for the hospitality industry. As the former general manager of the Jamaica Grand Resort in Ocho Rios, Jamaica, West Indies says, the ideal customer service representative is a person who is like a "100 Watt bulb," with an energy that is incredibly welcoming to the guest making the guest feel completely at ease, taken care of, and special. This soft skill is one of the hallmarks of the ideal hospitality employee. What is also crucial is demonstrated via one of the five service principles of the Ritz-Carlton Hotel, which may be the most important for hospitality workers, which is "Delivering the Wow Experience."

The researcher concludes that future research on this subject could entail bridging the gap in training for customer service by connecting the hospitality industry and students more directly by making internships and shadow programs more easily available to students. The researcher has also created a customer service course, which addresses the gap in students' perception of their soft skills and what they actually need in that area by focusing on the soft skills that are necessary for the industry in the course.

Moreover, as part of the original work on this project, the researcher proposes the creation of a Customer Service Readiness Index, which can be a useful tool for assessing students' readiness in terms of their abilities to perform in the hospitality industry.

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Table 1. Right angle research alignment.

Conceptual research questions	Data source	Analysis plan
How many students perceive themselves to possess soft skills and professional skills?	Student questionnaire, Item 5	Frequencies and percentage
What do students perceive to be the most important skills for a new hire?	Student questionnaire, Item 7	Conventional and summative content analysis (qualitative analysis)
What do students believe are the expectations of a new hire?	Student Questionnaire, Item 8	Conventional and summative content analysis (qualitative analysis)
What do students believe are the most important skills they learned during their internship?	Student questionnaire, Item 12	Conventional and summative content analysis (qualitative analysis)
What are the basic skills requirements of a job applicant?	General manager questionnaire, Item 1	Conventional and summative content analysis (qualitative analysis)
What skills do general managers believe a top-quality candidate must possess?	General manager questionnaire, Item 2	Conventional and summative content analysis (qualitative analysis)
What soft skills do general managers think are most important?	General manager questionnaire, Item 3	Conventional and summative content analysis (qualitative analysis)

Table 2. Frequency and percentage of students who claimed to possess the ability to demonstrate positive customer care.

Description	Response	<i>f</i>	%	Valid	Cumulative
				%	
Valid	Yes	65	98.5	98.5	98.5
	No	1	1.5	1.5	100.0
	Total	66	100.0	100.0	

Table 3. Frequency and percentage of students who claimed to possess the ability of critical thinking.

Description	Response	<i>f</i>	%	Valid	Cumulative
				%	
Valid	Yes	61	92.4	93.8	93.8
	No	4	6.1	6.2	100.0
	Subtotal	65	98.5	100.0	
Missing	No answer	1	1.5		
	Total	66	100.0		



Table 4. Frequency and percentage of students who claimed to possess professional skills.

Description	Response	<i>f</i>	%	Valid	Cumulative
				%	
Valid	Yes	61	92.4	93.8	93.8
	No	4	6.1	6.2	100.0
	Subtotal	65	98.5	100.0	
Missing	No answer	1	1.5		
	Total	66	100.0		

Table 5. Frequency and percentage of students who claimed to possess the ability to solve problems.

Description	Response	<i>f</i>	%	Valid	Cumulative
				%	
Valid	Yes	60	90.9	90.9	90.9
	No	6	9.1	9.1	100.0
	Total	66	100.0	100.0	

Table 6. Service industry skills students claimed to possess.

Skill	<i>f</i>	Valid (%)
Demonstrate positive customer care	65	98.5
Critical thinking	61	93.8
Professional	61	93.8
Ability to solve problems	60	90.9
Motivated to achieve desired results	60	92.3
Effective oral communication skills	59	89.4
Initiative and self-direction	59	89.4
Ability to multitask	58	87.9
Ability to show emotions	55	83.3
Turn conflicts into opportunities	49	74.2
Time management awareness	48	72.7
Effective written communication	45	68.2
Negotiating	42	64.6

Table 7. Frequency and percentage of students who mentioned these skills as the most important for a new hire.

Skill	<i>f</i>	%
Communication	24	36
People skills	15	23
Empathy and patience	10	15.2
Professionalism	5	7.6
Commitment and passion	3	5

Skill	<i>f</i>	%
Multitasking	3	5
Time management	3	5

Table 8. Frequency and percentage of students who mentioned these skills as expected of a new hire.

Skill	<i>f</i>	%
Communication	26	39.4
Customer service	15	23
Empathy and care	10	15.2
Professionalism	7	11

Table 9. Frequency and percentage of general managers who mentioned each skill as basic requirement of a job applicant.

Skill	<i>f</i>	%
People skills	16	36.4
Passion and care	12	27.3
Professionalism	11	25.0
Communication	3	7.0

Table 10. Frequency and percentage of general managers who mentioned these skills a top-quality candidate must possess.

Skill	<i>f</i>	%
Passion and care	11	27.5
People skills	9	22.5
Professionalism	8	20.0
Flexibility	6	15.0
Service attitude	5	12.5

Table 11. Frequency and percentage of general managers who mentioned these soft skills as most important.

Skill	<i>f</i>	%
People skills	12	48
Professionalism	5	20
Personality	3	12
Smile	2	8
Passion and care	2	8